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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the effectiveness of a program to improve the reading/vocabulary skills of an ability-grouped fifth grade class of "low achievers" (N=15) through the implementation of a literature-based whole language approach. Students were read aloud to from quality children's literature. From these books, spelling and vocabulary lists were developed and administered 30 minutes a day, 4 days a week during the scheduled classroom reading period. By means of a thematic web, additional skills and subject matter were interwoven so as to provide students with a less fragmented curriculum. The Iowa Tests of Basic Skills were administered in the spring prior to the program and again in the spring of the following year. Results indicated gains of: (1) one year and four months in vocabulary; (2) one year and five months in reading; and (3) seven months in spelling. While the positive statistical findings related to the project were encouraging, the classroom teacher was much more excited by the day-to-day response from the students. For the first time, this group of "low achievers" became aware of the function of print, the nature of written language, and the structure of narrative text. They began to value books, independently selected books appropriate for their reading level, and were eager to share books with each other and the teacher. (Two figures representing literature webs, four tables of data, and one graph are attached.) (RS)

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"WEAVING A WEB" OF LITERACY: A ONE-YEAR EVALUATION OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A LITERATURE-BASED WHOLE LANGUAGE APPROACH

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"WEAVING A WEB" OF LITERACY: A ONE-YEAR EVALUATION OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A LITERATURE-BASED WHOLE LANGUAGE APPROACH

The objective of this project was to improve the reading/vocabulary skills of an ability-grouped fifth grade class of "low achievers" through the implementation of a literature-based whole language approach. This approach correlated the "webbing" or integration of skills and topics in the language arts (as well as other content areas) to specific books and stories in children's literature.

As a part of the school's instructional plan, scores from the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) were analyzed at the end of the 1988-89 school year in order to pinpoint those areas of learning in greatest need of remediation.

Vocabulary was identified as the school's major area of weakness in both 1988 and 1989. Other weak areas (to a lesser degree) included reading and spelling. Unfortunately, the Vocabulary section of the ITBS is largely made up of words and definitions which are not presented in the county-adopted basal reader(s) nor in the county-approved spelling book(s). Consequently, a new approach or method of presentation had to be developed and implemented.

To this end, I sought to incorporate into the curriculum a "webbing" technique which would successfully integrate children's literature with the teaching of the desired skills and concepts necessary to the literacy process (specifically, those related to reading and writing). This method has been touted by educators, theorists, and researchers such as Burchby (1988); Henke (1988); Laughlin & Watt (1986); and Moss (1984).

A chief characteristic of literature-based programs is that teachers regularly read aloud to their students. As noted by Tunnell and Jacobs (1989), read aloud time provides opportunities for modeling and (for younger students) neurological impress. Furthermore, in two experiments conducted by Elley (1989), it was determined that "reading stories aloud to children is a significant source of vocabulary acquisition, that teachers' additional explanation of words as they are read can more than double such gains, and that the new learning is relatively permanent" (p. 185).

With this in mind, I read the nominees for the 1989-90 Georgia Children's Book Award during the summer prior to the school year in which the project was conducted. From those nominees deemed appropriate for reading aloud to the class, spelling/vocabulary lists were made. Words were selected on the bases of frequency of appearance on standardized tests, as well as usage by and interest to the target population.

Over the course of eight months, a total of 515 words and definitions were presented to students at an average rate of 4 to 5 words per day (15 words per week). On Tuesdays through Thursdays, adequate time was set aside for review of the spelling and meanings of the previous day's words. New words were then presented by a combination of the copy, definition (or dictionary), and contextual methods. This vocabulary training program was administered for approximately 30 minutes a day, four days a week during the scheduled classroom reading period.

By means of a thematic web, additional skills and subject matter were interwoven so as to provide students with a less fragmented curriculum. Once a web was developed around a theme, topic-related activities for the other content areas were actively sought and compiled. For example, students studying animals observed ants; took notes and wrote descriptions in a class journal; drew an area from a bird's or insect's point of view (after the sharing of Chris Van Allsburg's picture book nominee Two Bad Ants); read poems, stories, and books about animals; sang songs like "The Animal Fair"; traced the fanciful development of certain animal characteristics through the viewing of animated videos based upon Kipling's Just So Stories; researched and illustrated animal reports which were then shared with classmates; listened to the teacher read aloud from Georgia Book nominees A Horse to Love and Cady; and wrote letters to author Lillian

Eige, who graciously responded with a two-page letter to the class. (See thematic "web".)

As previously noted, data for this project were obtained through administration of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills on a pretest and posttest basis to evaluate the vocabulary, reading, and spelling achievement of fifth grade pupils before and following participation in literature-based whole language activities.

The scores from the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills administered to the target population in fourth grade in the spring of 1989 were compared to the spring 1990 ITBS scores for the same group of students as fifth graders. A preliminary comparison indicated average gains for these fifth grade students of one year four months in Vocabulary; one year five months in Reading; and seven months in Spelling. A series of paired t-tests between pretest and posttest results were then used to identify significant gains, and analyses of covariance were employed to analyze the data collected.

The t-value(s) of 5.68 and 5.46 revealed significant differences (at the .0001 level) between pretest and posttest performance on the Vocabulary and Reading sections of the ITBS. Furthermore, the t-value of 4.46 revealed a significant difference (at the .0005 level) between pretest and posttest performance in the area of Spelling. (See tables and graph.)

These findings were consistent with those previously documented by Tunnell (1986) who employed a literature-based

reading and writing program with stalled fifth grade readers. In his study, after seven months of treatment, standardized tests were administered and those students who had been stalled in their reading progress posted an average gain of one year three months.

While the positive statistical findings related to the project were encouraging, I (as a classroom teacher) was much more excited by the day-to-day response from the children with whom I worked. For the first time, this group of "low achievers" became aware of the function of print, the nature of written language, and the structure of narrative texts. As they began to interact with texts, they learned strategies by which to generate meaning, and once meaning was obtained, they began to make connections ("weaving their own webs", if you will) between written and spoken words in the process of communication. For example, students were quick to point out vocabulary words in various trade books and textbooks, and to report the use of one of "our" words by an anchorman on the "Nightly News".

They began to value books, as evidenced by their better handling and care of the paperbacks provided in the classroom and the trade books checked out of the library. They began to view themselves as readers and behaved accordingly.

Students independently selected books appropriate for their reading level(s), and their choices ran the gamut in terms of subject matter and literary style. They were

willing to read or to be read to, and they showed pleasure in either type of reading. They were eager to discuss and write about books and characters, relating settings, plots, and actions to their own personal experiences. They became quite adept at predicting outcomes. When the school sponsored a book fair in the spring, my students could not wait to invest in a previously shared title or a new book related to past or present units of study. The proud owners willingly shared these books with each other and the teacher.

These were the things that were observable before the administration of the standardized tests and, as noted by Harp (1988), sometimes "the most significant evaluation is in the teacher's head" (p. 160). I wholeheartedly concur with Cambourne and Turbill (1990) who have stated that "responsive evaluation can be applied at the classroom level, and that the data it generates will tell us more about children's developing control of language than the standardized tests the schools have. Such an approach to assessment can be as trustworthy and 'scientific' as a measurement-based approach and leads to more and better learning by both pupils and teachers" (pp. 345-346).

Given the societal necessity for basic literacy skills, processes by which to associate meanings with written words for better understanding, recall, and communication (both written and verbal) are essential. Students in the elementary grades should begin early to participate in these

processes which will help them throughout their lives. The results of this project would seem to indicate that a "webbing" technique that integrates language arts as well as other content area skills and children's literature can be most successful in improving vocabulary, reading, and spelling proficiency of "low achievers" and thereby increasing their literacy level.

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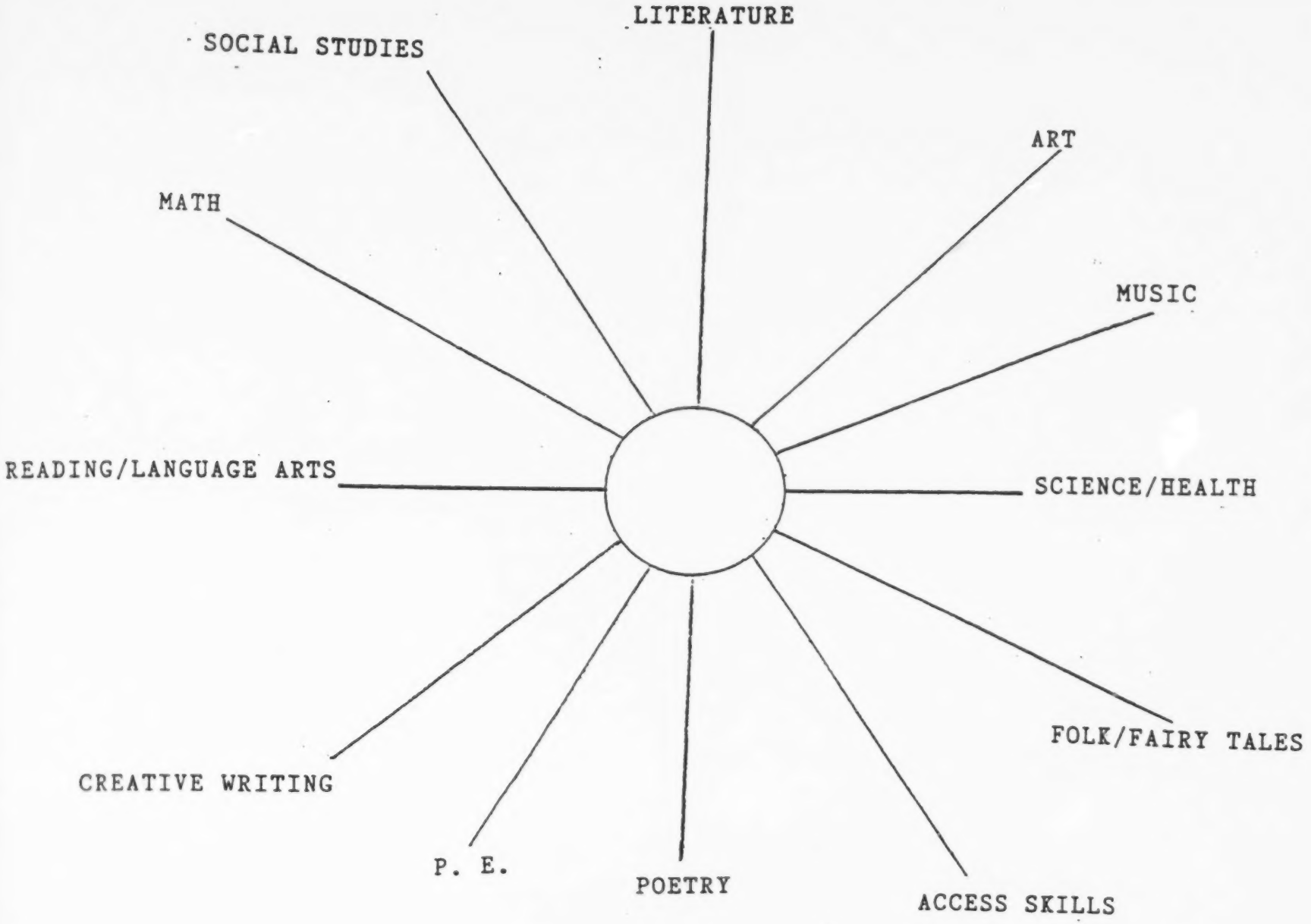
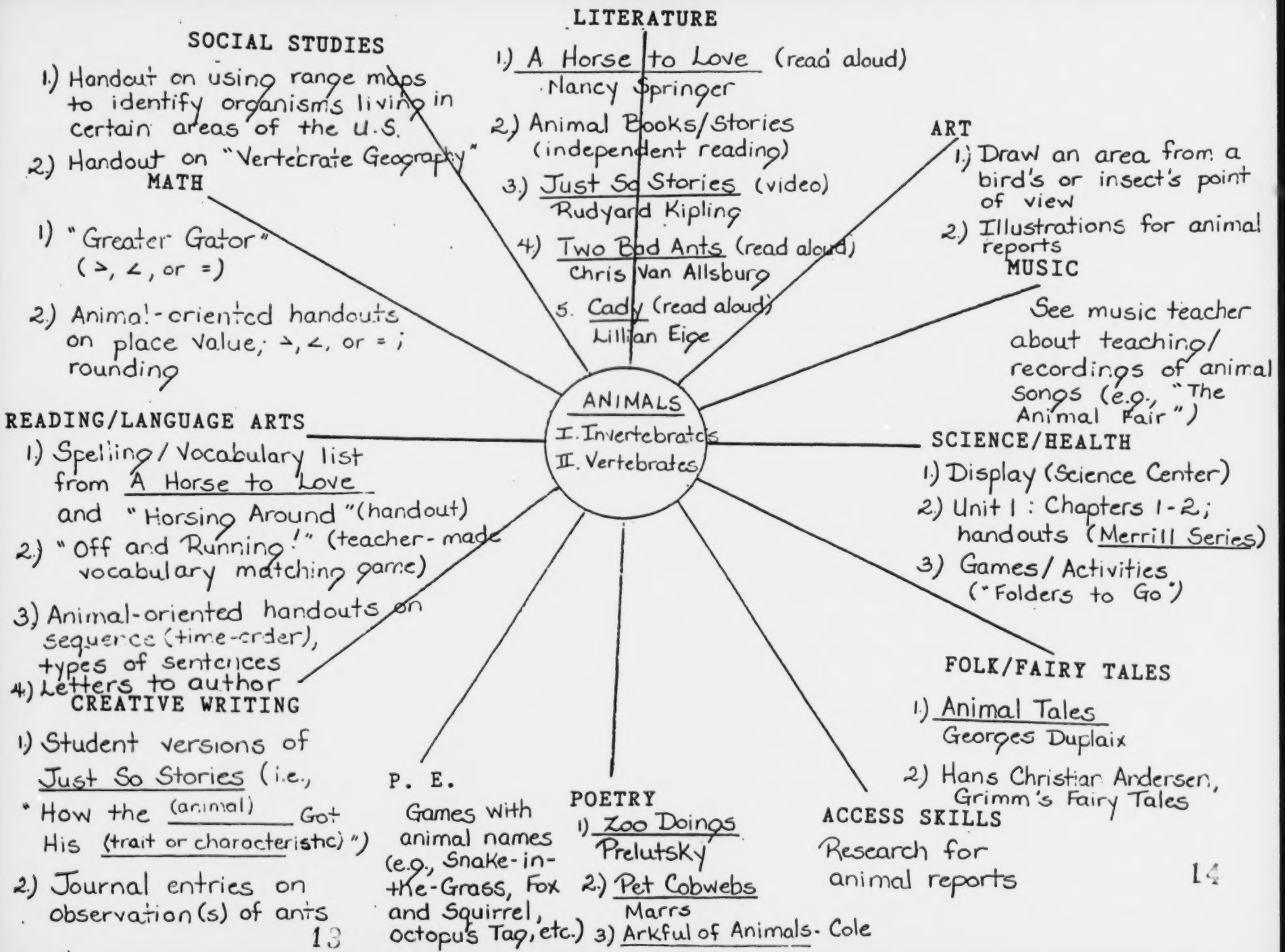
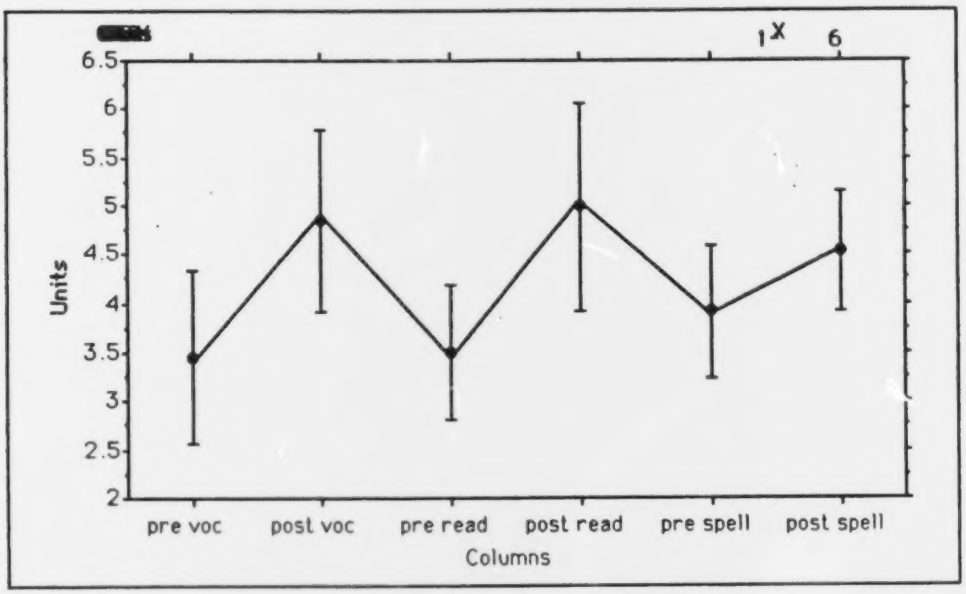

LITERATURE
SOCIAL STUDIES
ART
MATH
MUSIC
READING/LANGUAGE ARTS
SCIENCE/HEALTH
FOLK/FAIRY TALES
CREATIVE WRITING
P. E.
POETRY
ACCESS SKILLS


ANIMALS
I. Invertebrates
II. Vertebrates
LITERATURE
1.) A Horse to Love (read aloud)
Nancy Springer
2.) Animal Books/Stories (independent reading)
3.) Just So Stories (video)
Rudyard Kipling
4.) Two Bad Ants (read aloud)
Chris Van Allsburg
5. Cady (read aloud)
Lillian Eige
SOCIAL STUDIES
1.) Handout on using range maps to identify organisms living in certain areas of the U.S.
2.) Handout on "Vertebrate Geography"
MATH
1) "Greater Gator" (>, <, or =)
2.) Animal-oriented handouts on place value; >, <, or = ; rounding
ART
1.) Draw an area from a bird's or insect's point of view
2.) Illustrations for animal reports
MUSIC
See music teacher about teaching/ recordings of animal songs (e.g., "The Animal Fair")
READING/LANGUAGE ARTS
1.) Spelling/Vocabulary list from A Horse to Love and "Horsing Around" (handout)
2.) "Off and Running!" (teacher-made vocabulary matching game)
3) Animal-oriented handouts on sequence (time-order), types of sentences
4) Letters to author
SCIENCE/HEALTH
1.) Display (Science Center)
2.) Unit 1 : Chapters 1-2; handouts (Merrill Series)
3) Games/Activities ("Folders to Go")
CREATIVE WRITING
1.) Student versions of Just So Stories (i.e., "How the (animal) Got His (trait or characteristic)")
2.) Journal entries on observation(s) of ants
P. E.
Games with animal names (e.g., Snake-in-the-Grass, Fox and Squirrel, octopus Tag, etc.)
POETRY
1) Zoo Doings
Prelutsky
2.) Pet Cobwebs
Marrs
3) Arkful of Animals - Cole
ACCESS SKILLS
Research for animal reports
FOLK/FAIRY TALES
1.) Animal Tales
Georges Duplaix
2) Hans Christian Andersen, Grimm's Fairy Tales

	pre voc	post voc	pre read	post read	pre spell	post spell
1	3.9	5.5	3.6	5.7	2.5	4.3
2	3.9	5.1	4.2	7.2	3.9	4.6
3	3.0	4.6	2.7	6.9	3.9	4.3
4	3.3	5.1	2.8	3.0	3.0	3.5
5	4.6	5.6	4.6	5.2	3.9	3.9
6	4.9	5.5	2.5	4.5	5.1	5.4
7	3.7	3.5	4.1	4.9	4.9	5.4
8	3.3	5.1	3.2	3.9	3.7	4.6
9	2.0	2.2	4.4	4.9	4.2	4.9
10	4.0	5.9	4.0	4.6	3.6	4.1
11	3.7	4.9	4.0	5.6	4.7	5.0
12	3.5	4.6	2.8	4.6	3.6	4.3
13	2.0	5.1	2.8	4.1	3.9	3.5
14	3.9	4.7	3.4	4.7	3.4	4.9
15	2.0	5.4	3.3	5.1	4.3	5.2

summary of means and standard deviations



Paired t-Test X | : post voc Y | : pre voc

DF:	Mean X - Y:	Paired t value:	Prob. (2-tail):
14	1.41	5.68	.0001

Paired t-Test X | : post read Y | : pre read

DF:	Mean X - Y:	Paired t value:	Prob. (2-tail):
14	1.5	5.46	.0001

Paired t-Test X | : post spell Y | : pre spell

DF:	Mean X - Y:	Paired t value:	Prob. (2-tail):
14	.62	4.46	.0005